

Miracles in Pattaya

By Patrick McGeown

I'd always been afraid of disabled people. I'm not sure why. Perhaps it is because I never knew what to do when I saw them. And when I saw them I'd shy away — maybe they would ask a question and I couldn't answer it — or, perhaps, they'd want me to help them in some way and I'd be embarrassed. But that perception changed after I was introduced to the Redemptorist Vocational School for Handicapped Young Thai Adults — a place where miracles happen.

This very special school has been training disabled young adults for eight years, and this year the intake topped 145 students. For every one of them, it is the beginning of a whole new life — their wildest dreams have come true. All the students come from poor families, and none have had an opportunity of furthering their education.

When you come from a poor family you have to battle hard to make something out of your life. And if you are disabled too, your chances are lessened further. Of course you have the love of your family and friends, but you rarely ask for anything. You feel you are a burden on your poor family. Your self-esteem is very low. And if you could have one wish, it would be that you could be self-sufficient and be able to help your family.

So when someone offers you a free course for two years to learn electronics or computers, you would probably get a little excited. And excited isn't the word. The day a new student intake arrives at the school, you can feel the energy in the air. Young disabled adults arrive in all shapes and sizes. Some with deformed legs and arms, others with gross deformities; hunchbacks, burn victims, and then some. But when they enter the school gates they momentarily forget their disabilities — and without exception they are the happiest people in the world.

But the school isn't a holiday camp. It's hard work. Many of the students haven't been to school for years, and to help bring them up to a set standard



Some of the estimated one million disabled people in Thailand. At this school there are lots of smiles. You're never alone when you're part of a team.



they have to study extra 'informal education' in their spare time and holidays. They also study English language as a minor subject to acquaint them with computer terminology.

The school has 20 teachers, who pass on their skills in computer science, electronic repair, and English. Most of the teachers are graduates of the school themselves. As computer technology is forever changing, teachers have to be kept up-to-date with the latest developments; they have to know what the business market needs. The school encourages teachers to attend seminars and courses. And, as well as paying for the courses, the school grants paid leave to attend. The school's philosophy is if you want to turn out the best, they must be taught by the best. And going by the results, that philosophy has paid off 638 times.

Of the 638 students who have studied at the school, 100 per cent have graduated. And of the 638 who graduated, 100 per cent had positions before they left the school grounds. Companies like Telecom Asia, Thai Honda, Toshiba, Hong Kong & Shanghai

Bank, Pramongkut Hospital, Tilleke & Gibbins Law Firm, AC&C Consultants Co, Asia Hotel, Dusit Resorts, and the Royal Cliff Hotel are only a few of the companies that have employed the graduates. The students are in demand.

In the school's early days, many kind people donated their old computers; but that proved unsatisfactory. For the students to gain worthwhile employment they need to be trained on, and understand, the latest hardware and software. Thankfully, many kind individuals and companies have helped make this possible. Leading companies like Telecom Asia and IBM have helped keep the school at the forefront with the latest hardware and software. The more donations and sponsorships they receive, the more students can the school admit. (At present, the school can accommodate 200).

Sport is of major importance, and, as well as competing in local competitions, students from the school have represented Thailand in China, Australia, Laos, Korea, Japan, Spain and elsewhere. On any weekend and evening you can see the students in training at the school, and on the streets of Pattaya.

The school has a reputation for turning out some of the hardest working computer brains in the land. The dedication of the teachers and the willingness of the students makes this a very unique school. When you only have one chance in life, you tend to give it your best shot. The students are keen, attentive and committed to achieving their goal. They leave their homes unsure, frightened, and in doubt, but they return as human beings beaming with

other reason this school gets my vote.

The school cooperates with the Thai government and also other private agencies in helping to improve the situation of the disabled in Thailand. It has been talked about all over the world, and is being used as a model in many other countries. Television shows from around the globe have done documentaries on this little piece of heaven. It is a very special place that changes the lives of many — including that of the casual visitor.

Once upon a time I used to shudder at the sight of the disabled. But after a few years of regular visits and talking to them as equals I have now gained some treasured friends. A few weeks ago the students were joking about my baldness — and here they were in wheel-

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confidence — and in several instances have become the main financial support of the family. Something like that does wonders for your self-esteem.

The school is run by the Catholic Redemptorist Priests, whose sole objective is to help people who have no opportunities. And they do it out of love. No student is ever asked to follow the Catholic faith. They arrive as Buddhists and leave as Buddhists. That's an-

chairs, on crutches, hunchbacks and dwarfs, all joking about my hair loss. It was a very special moment in my life as I knew I had been accepted. But, more importantly, I had accepted them.

The Redemptorist School for Handicapped Thai Young Adults is at the 145 km mark on the right hand side of Sukhumvit Highway in Pattaya. If you blink you'll miss it. Tel (038) 716-247-9. Visitors are welcome. **I**



Patrick McGeown works in advertising, teaches, and enjoys anything humorous and different.



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